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ONE WORLD: ONE LIFE.

A SERMON

Preached in the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia,

JANUARY 22, 1882.

By JOSEPH MAY, Minister of the Church.

"Those whom many a land divides,
Many mountains, many tides,
Each with other may have part,
May have fellowship in heart.

"And the holy dead have still,
Part in all our joy and ill,
One in thought and one in love,
We below and they above."

One World: One Life.

Text—John xiv, 2: "*In my Father's house are many mansions.*"

A striking characteristic of all great natural forces is their subtilty. To all other sensibilities than those they specifically affect they may be absolutely intangible. Gravity is the constant condition of the durability of the universe; its action is omnipresent; but what is it? By what can you discern it, except by this, that it pulls all things to the centre? Cohesion is like it. Chemical affinities, how utterly mysterious! I wonder that to all students of matter this fine quality of the fundamental substance does not more strongly recommend the theory that matter is a form of thought.

So of moral agencies. How inexplicable the forces by which we are controlled! What is conscience? What is love? What is even selfishness? Analyze the sentiments of home, of parental affection, of martial valor and see how they escape your solvents! Selfishness is universal and most insidious; but how strangely, on the other hand, while on every side lie appeals the most searching to it, that force of conscience interposes and, rather than not gratify it, all men forego myriad opportunities of self-indulgence and self-promotion. Society is divided among pairs of human hearts that cling together like the hemispheres of

Magdeburg, making of twain one whole. What is it holds them? It seemed chance that brought them together. To on-lookers either has nothing peculiarly to attract. To each of themselves the world holds nothing else.

"Give me but what this ribband bound,
Take all the rest the sun goes round."

The love either gives the other might be spurned by all the world beside. To themselves it is an overmastering gravitation, inexplicable but irresistible, and what all other women might turn away from, to one is the inestimable treasure, the pearl of great price in her life, the thing that makes her glad under all privations, but deprived of which she would die, and gladly die.

In fact the rule is, the more elusive the agency the more enduring, and I may add, the more powerful it is. If there is one influence which has been stronger than love in this world it has been religion; that other inscrutable bond which holds men to an unseen, inaudible, retreating, but supreme, commanding object of loyalty and devotion.

It is this subtility of forces that gives importance to many things unimportant in form, perhaps, but the expressions of great realities.

One example of this I will remark on further. It is in the power of language. That varieties of sounds can convey thought at all is a wonder. What the connection is between the thought and its symbol in sound has never, I dare say, been adequately shown. But the power this vehicle of ideas has acquired is almost unparallelled. How easily any one of us here might utter but a vocable or two to another which would excite contempt or horror, and

perhaps cause estrangement forever! By a few sounds your tears might be set flowing. At others, a ripple of smiles go over your faces. Byron says—

"Religion, freedom, virtue, what you will,
A word's enough to raise mankind to kill.
Some factious phrase, by cunning caught and spread,
That guilt may reign and wolves and worms be fed."

No other art, not even music, has the power of poetry. Homer, Horace, Shakespere, Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier;—painters and sculptors speak to some, musicians to many, these are the men who have spoken to all, and will forever speak.

Language is the most exquisite mechanical agency furnished by Providence for the convenience of men.

Then on its correct and refined use very much must always hang. The growth of thought itself depends much on the language at the command of the thinker, and in which he thinks. The imperfectness of each particular tongue constitutes a hindrance to various forms of thought. For each there are some ideas, or shades of idea, which it cannot express, and so they must be imperfectly caught by the minds which employ it.

This is especially the case with respect to religious ideas.

Religion deals with entities beyond the range of sensible observation. But it is within this range, of course, that common language has its rise and shapes its symbols. To the realm of religious conceptions these are extended by analogy, chiefly, and defect or limitation in the analogy, supplying us with imperfect symbols, must needs warp religious conceptions and impede religious thought.

For example, one of the most obvious analogies of external and internal life has in many languages given its name to the essential principle in our human nature. Of this essential principle all men have been more or less conscious. They have been impressed by its intangibility to every sense; its fineness of quality; its elusiveness; its power. So they have everywhere sought for a commanding but invisible physical agency to liken it with,—something also intangible, elusive, yet potent. Everywhere, and most naturally, they have found it in the air. It is the air which, inhaled and exhaled, sustains life and betokens it. When the breath stops, the man is gone! The essential principle shows itself no longer! Even in the larger phenomena of the air there were analogies. How the wind gently soothes you, caressing your cheek like a soft, beloved palm! How it assails you like a fierce foe, bearing you down in its fury! How it sighs among pines, or whispers out of sea-shells, or roams over the ocean, or shrieks among the mountains! There is a personality in the wind which no other natural agency exhibits.

So for our invisible part, our essential principle, it was the breath and the wind gave men their symbols.

But see how such a physical symbol may qualify or limit the higher conception it is used to convey. At present, the word as "spirit" has lost for us most of its original significance. But for ages it kept much. And so men thought of the spirit that it was a tenuous, invisible, or almost invisible form of matter. It haunted earthly places. It might be seen, now and then, in strange ways. When St. Peter got out of prison, and they could not believe he could have escaped bodily from that stern hold, yet saw him standing, his friends declared "it is his spirit."

But there is no substantial likeness between this essential principle of human nature and any form of matter, however tenuous. They belong to two totally distinct and

contrasted orders. The spirit is no more like your breath issuing in vapor from the lips, than it is like your muscles and bones, or like the coat you wear. The whole body *is* but its vestment and implement. To conceive it wholesomely you must get rid of all external symbolism whatever, and think of it only in its manifestation of itself in conscience, will, sympathy, aspiration, and the like actual phenomena of it.

Some cognate conceptions linger possibly as ineradically and also largely from the want of adequate and correct symbolism in language. Rudimentary fancy seeing brightness and glory in the over-arching sky,—the sky which holds the air in its inverted goblet—naturally dreamed that thither the fleeting, air-like spirits, as they fancied them, of men winged their way. So our own name, as in other languages the name of the world wherein men abide after this tabernacle of flesh is laid aside, comes from this analogy. We call it still "heaven"—the "heaved-up," lifted, over-hanging region. And still, as of old, we speak of "going" thither, as by a physical migration. Perchance, —shall I say, doubtless?—the spirit which, because finite and imperfect, has needed outward form, still needs it and finds it in what St. Paul calls the "celestial body." The belief is reasonable. But that this celestial form shall have any resemblance to earthly matter, shall occupy physical space, shall dwell anywhere whither our gaze can be directed—all this we must hesitate to formulate. We can frame no conception, though we yearn deeply, of the outward accidents of the present life of dear ones whose earthly faces we see no more. Only we know that

> "* * What is excellent
> By God's grace is permanent."

That what was real in them, could not be touched by death, nor marred, nor changed. Can disease, or accident, touch love, touch aspiration, touch purity, touch sympathy,

rectitude, faith? Let us think of them as still exercising these real powers and graces, still marked by these, still growing in their beauty. But we cannot place them. Perhaps they have no environment which relates them to place. If we cannot restrain longing fancy, then better than that distant abode in the sky, is the thought to which a modern poet gives form:

> "It lies about us like a cloud,
> A world we cannot see,
> And the soft closing of an eye
> May bring us there to be."

"in an instant," as the Apostle said.

We need not fancy that long migration—we need not think of them in strange or distant scenes. What is sure is, that whatever their spirits' surroundings, the love, the sympathy, which made them what they were, still make them what they are. And these bind them to us in a relation which has no physical measure of far and near. The real nearness never was that of space, but of sentiment, emotion, mutual responsiveness. In these, if they were near once, they are near forever.

And do we not, therefore, likewise keep up in our hearts an imperfect conception when we speak of the dead as "departed"? From the outward stage and order of being in which we remain, they are, so far as eyes can see, withdrawn. But from the sphere of our own true life—the world of love which gives all its reality and charm to our being—they are not only not departed, they are forever more intensely and vividly present there. How they live in our thought, the sacred undertone which gives peace and the possibility of happiness to careers that otherwise would be all dark and pain! In fact, it is only when the ebullitions of grief are at length partly subdued, and we begin to feel

that they are *not* parted from us, but remain the inseverable companions of our hearts and thoughts, a constant presence in our lives, but now almost more closely—only then that we can recover peace. We find an outward changed for an inward relation, the latter even intensified by the withdrawal of the former. To apprehend clearly a thing so refined is not facile to our undeveloped natures, even as we discern the imperfectness of the love we bore them and bear each other, while selfishness is still an element hard to conquer in our hearts. So they *are* removed from us, by as much as the real bond between us was less potent than it should have been. But we learn in what its reality consisted, and must consist. And this may grow still, even though what was outward and perishable is gone. We may love *more*, we may draw and be drawn *more* near. Ah! it is not death that parts us, but the imperfectness of our love—that is not strong enough sometimes to hold us together.

But, even so, with all our weaknesses, it is not true that the dead are departed. Rather none are so near as they! About this great living city of a million souls cluster and cling as many more beside, disembodied, unseen, yet in each home the very centres of its affection and thought, the arbiters of its conduct, the standard of its aspirations. Ideals, now, yet never so real before! Almost, one might say, the household has a want which has not such as these. How great their influence for good none can measure. A wonderful solace and corrective they are amidst the lower trials and petty ambitions of life. Poor homes are glorified by them. Luxurious ones are chastened, and they seem less worldly when you encounter in them these unspeaking presences.

No, the dead are *not* "absent," they are *not* departed, but to our love always accessible, responsive to every mood, monitors in every exigency. The baby, whose little body its young mother hid in earth's bosom two score years

ago, nestles at her own heart still, the baby that grows not old, nor changes, nor leaves her. I have known an old and wrinkled woman, homely and bowed,—but for half a century she had had her stalwart lover, constant and present, and still young and fair, although under the sea,—

> "Those are pearls that were his eyes,
> Of his bones are coral made,"

long, long ago. All else changes, but the dead change not, nor fade, nor fail us.

> "Nothing is our own;—we hold our pleasures
> Just a little while and they are fled.
> One by one life robs us of our treasures,
> Nothing is our own except our dead."

And so, especially, I think we do ourselves a harm in all the strong distinctions which common language is apt to draw between this present and the state of being in which those dear ones are, and we shall all soon be. It is "the other world," in our speech; "the future life." But really it is all one with this. "In the Father's house are many mansions," but it is one house forever. The only real divisions are those of character, sympathy, purpose. It is these and not any outward facts, which place us in one mansion or another, one stage or another, of our eternal home. What is the significance of what we call our outward state, in which there appears a contrast between us and those whom we call dead, we know not, and to them the difference may seem slight. To us what is a barrier opaque, to them may be but a thin veil. But whatever the distinction is it belongs not to that of us which is real. The reality in us has for its features not the soft eye, and the glowing cheek, nor for its scenery the green earth and the blue sky, but love, trust, kindness, virtue, purity. And it

is by moral qualities and moral sympathies we are united or divided. These range each of us, not merely with those who still wear the mantle of the flesh, but often more closely with those whose neighborship is that of character and thought and purpose only. Of such, many may have to be sought among those who have laid the fleshly mantle by. And the world that spirits thus congenial are in, is one world; yes, one, though they not as yet find one another. Sympathy, likeness, makes it one, and peoples it.

> "No one is so accurst by fate,
> No one so utterly desolate
> But some heart, tho' unknown,
> Responds unto his own,"

—responds, perhaps, across the narrow sea which we call death, and even far down the corridors of what we call Time. Are there not souls among the great and good of every age to which your own turns and clings as by a power of mutual insight, of spiritual sympathy, which makes them of one brotherhood with you? Are there no heroes, poets, saints, of ages gone, with whom you feel yourself a familiar friend? Are there none in that realm we call heaven to whom you feel as if your feet would tend instinctively as you enter there? Then your heart's life is indeed barren! Sympathy is the gravity of the realm of spirit, holding kindred souls together eternally. There is no "other world," but all one world. Is not this, one, though seas flow and mountains rise to divide it? But we learn to sail over the seas, and we scale, or raze, the mountains, and find it one. Still more we find it one as we rise above selfishness and prejudice, and discern that God hath made of one blood all nations. So as we conquer like foes within ourselves, as we clear our vision and strengthen our faith, we shall see that THERE IS but the world of spirit, in which we eternally

are,—in which are all the children of God. As we fasten upon its realities the externals which accompany our finite lives betray their unreality and constitute no longer boundaries or dividing lines. In spirit is unity eternally.

So let us not be betrayed by our habit of speech which refers often to the "future" life. As our real life is of eternal quality, it is in all its essentials, here and now. Whatever we can ever be or do, is open to us *now*. No duty but is incumbent *now*. No attainment possible but we may begin it *now*. No grace that would beautify us but we may begin to put it on *now*. No spiritual knowledge but we may be progressing towards it, or in it, *now*. We have the universe before us to study, God with us to aid us in all endeavor, *now*. Whatever we are capable of we can gain *now*, and so only become capable of better. "Be ye perfect," said Jesus, "even as your Father in heaven is perfect," not hereafter, but *now*. There may possibly be new and great helps available, as experience unrolls itself beyond the grave; but we shall be able to use them only as we are faithful and docile *now*. Do not postpone, as if one day it would be easier to be virtuous, easier to be unselfish, easier to be holy. It will never be easier, it will only grow harder. Death will not help you. As you are when you lay off the bodily part you shall be when you rise away from it. The life you are now leading has all the reality, all the dignity, all the help, any will have *for you*. If you cannot find these it is because your spirit is still gross and low. Have you not seen, or known, or read of those who did find them, and made life great and holy? Only such can make any stage of being beautiful. For the kingdom of heaven is within us,—here, anywhere.

Our active life is always present. The past has no reality, it has yielded all up in its consequences to the present. The future is unreal until it becomes present. So there is no *future* life, but only *life*, and that such as we make it, day

by day. If you propose ever to make anything of life—if you propose ever to *have* any real life—now is the time to begin. There will never be a more convenient moment. Our late lost poet breathed all his incomparable grace, and more than his usual fire, when he sang:

"Trust no future, howe'er pleasant,
Let the dead Past bury its dead;
Act, act, in the living Present,
Heart within and God o'erhead."

So from a lyre which has been echoing for a score of centuries comes still the cool, but inspiriting warning:

"Begin, be bold, and venture to be wise!
He who defers this work from day to day,
Doth on a river's bank expecting stay,
Till the whole stream which stops him shall be gone,
Which runs, and running, running, forever shall run on."